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The Desert of Death;

Or, Frank Reade, Jr., Exploring an Unknown Land.

By "NONAME."



Galloping madly up within a few yards of the machine, they threw themselves from their horses' backs, and rushed forward on foot to board the Traveller. "Now!" cried Frank Reade, Jr.; "this is our time. Give it to them!" The Winchesters cracked with deadly effect.

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The Desert of Death;

OR,

FRANK READE, JR., EXPLORING AN UNKNOWN LAND.

A STRANGE STORY OF SIBERIA.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "The Lost Lake," "37 Bags of Gold," "The Monarch of the Moon," "The White Atoll," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE STORY OF A STRANGE LAND.

"It is a common belief that most of the earth's surface, barring the Polar regions, has been thoroughly traveled by the explorer. But I know of a land which no white man has ever crossed, and which is the superstitious fear and horror of every native living upon its borders."

Daniel Sharpe, globe trotter and man of adventure, spoke with earnestness and decision. He knocked the ashes from his half burned cigar and settled himself back comfortably in his chair.

He was a tall, well formed man, with a bronzed complexion and a certain blase air which is acquired only by the man who has seen about all that the world has to afford.

Opposite him sat a young and slender man, who would have attracted attention anywhere. He was handsome and extremely intellectual. All over the world his name was known. Frank Reade, Jr., the distinguished young inventor was no stranger to fame.

These two remarkable men sat in the lobby of the Waldorf Hotel in the city of New York.

It was a meeting by appointment, for a few days previous Frank Reade, Jr., had received a letter from Daniel Sharpe, at his home in Readestown, asking him to meet him in New York on a certain date, upon a matter of very great importance.

Sharpe had just returned from an eighteen months' tour of Siberia and Northern Asia.

He had visited most of the great exile colonies and prisons, and observed the terrible punishment inflicted by Russia's iron hand. His wanderings had taken him far into the Steppes, and beyond to the verge of the strangely famous and unknown Desert of Death.

This region which covered an enormous extent of territory had interested him greatly. It was a region which even his hardihood and inclination for adventures would not allow him to invade.

But upon his return to New York he had chanced to read an item in the newspapers as follows:

"The distinguished young inventor, Frank Reade, Jr., of Readestown, has just perfected his latest achievement, the electric cross-country Traveller. The new vehicle is designed for travel in wild, unexplored countries, and is thoroughly equipped and fitted up for a year's trip in a foreign land, where plenty of wild adventure and thrilling experience may be had. It is understood that Mr. Reade, with Barney and Pomp, his servants, are soon to start upon a trip across Asia Minor aboard the Traveller. We hope to secure some day an interesting account of their experiences."

At once Daniel Sharpe laid his plans. He was determined to enlist Frank Reade, Jr., and his electric Traveller in the great and interesting project of exploring the terrible tract known as the Desert of Death.

So immediately upon arriving in New York he corresponded with Frank. And this was what had brought the two men together at the Waldorf Hotel.

Frank was interested in Sharpe's statement, with which this story is opened.

In fact, the young inventor was at once enthused with the plan as outlined by Sharpe. The distinguished traveler related many wonderful incidents connected with his travels in Siberia.

"But would we not be likely to have much trouble with the Russian government for invading that part of Siberia?" asked Frank.

"I have traveled all over Siberia without any difficulty," declared Sharpe.

"Ah, that may be," replied Frank, "but you traveled in the usual manner and alone. When it comes to taking the machine and a party into the land of the exile, the Czar's officials might object."

Sharpe saw Frank's point.

"I don't think we need have any fear," he said. "I will guarantee that no harm shall come to you or to the Electric Traveller. I am sure that with your wonderful vehicle we can accomplish the exploration of that unknown land, and bring to light much of service to ourselves and the world."

"Then you believe that it is really an uninhabited, unexplored tract?"

"I believe it to be unexplored," replied Sharpe; "whether uninhabited or not I cannot say. But this I do know, that many an explorer, many a daring party of Kurds has gone into the Desert of Death, but none have ever returned."

"How do you account for that?" asked Frank wonderingly.

"There is no way to account for it save by actual exploration."

"But suppose we should fall victims to the same cause which has prevented their return?"

"I do not fear that," replied Sharpe. "We would of course be better equipped and better protected against the perils of the desert. I feel sure we would succeed."

"I have no doubt of your good judgment, Mr. Sharpe," said Frank finally, "and without discussing the matter farther I will decide to enter upon the project with you. Now, at what time shall we start?"

Sharpe was delighted.

He sprang up and gripped Frank's hand warmly.

"God bless you!" he cried. "You have the right spirit, Mr. Reade. I will leave it to you what day we shall start for Siberia."

"I think we had better start at once!"

"Good!"

"I have a few preparations to make. I must go back to Readestown first and see about packing the machine. She is so built that she can be taken apart and carried in sections in a vessel's hold. A few other affairs will claim my attention for a day or two. Then we will be off."

"Very good," agreed Sharpe. "I know a smart little steamer which we can charter to take us from New York direct to Constantinople. Thence we will find transportation across the Black Sea to some small port at the base of the Caucasus Mountains. There we may disembark, and our journey through Asia will really begin. We must bear north and west across the Volga and the Ural, and over the Steppes to Northern Siberia. It is a journey of several thousand miles, but I believe we can do it all right."

"A very good course," commented Frank, "although a long one. Is there none shorter?"

"Oh, certainly, by way of the Baltic and St. Petersburg. But as you have already intimated, there is the prime danger of trouble with the Russian authorities."

"You are right," agreed Frank, readily. "Your course is the best. We will proceed to follow it."

A few moments later Frank was taking leave of Sharpe at the hotel entrance. He took a carriage and drove to the railroad station.

The next day he was in Rendestown.

His return was warmly welcomed by at least two of the residents of this smart little city.

These were his two faithful men and fellow travelers, Barney and Pomp.

Barney O'Shea was a genuine type of the Celt, with fiery red hair and a comical brogue. Pomp was a diminutive but plucky negro, black as a coal.

They were two jolly rogues as ever lived, and exceedingly fond of playing practical jokes upon each other. That night, when Barney received a telegram from Frank Reade, Jr., announcing his purpose and that he would arrive the next day, the Celt was immensely pleased.

"Be me sowl, there's good times coming," he cried. "An' shure, naygur, it's a thrip to Asia fer us. How's that noo?"

"Golly!" cried Pomp, rolling his eyes wildly, "dnt am de bes' fng I'se heard ob fo' a long time. Dis chile gwine to tell yo' dat dere nm queer people out dar in Asia. I done reckon yo' bettnh git yo' ha'r colored afo' we git dar!"

Barney stared at his colleague.

"Eh?" he ejaculated; "phwat do yez mane hy that noo, nnygur?"

"Sunh, I'sh, if dey see yo' out dar wif dnt color oh hn'r yo' kin bet dat yo'll neber leave dat Kentry nliba. It am too great a curios-ity fo' dem people to let slip froo dere hands."

Barney's eyes flashed.

"Do yez mane to insult me?" he roared. "Shure there's red-headed people out there as well as anywhere else, an' fer that it's no disgrace at all, sor."

"Huh! don' yo' membah yo' jogophry, sah? All de Roosians an' de Turks am dark complected, sah. Dey don't know nuffin 'bout redheads!"

Barney spnt on his hands.

"Be me sowl, I kin see that yez are afther insultin' me!" he cried.

"Shure I'll call ye down fer thot, sor, an' yez innt retaliate or pay for it, sor!"

Pomp sniffed scornfully.

"Yo' kin talk dat way all yo' pleasea," he exclaimed, "hut yo' kain't skeer nobody. I don't keer no mor' fo' yo' dan I does fo' a lily yaller dorg. I jes' doin' yo' n' faver, sah, in tellin' yo' to change de color ob yo' ha'r hese' yo' gits to Asia."

This was enough for Barney.

"Pull off yez coat, naygur!" he gritted; "shure it's sathisfaction I'll be afther havin' for the insult."

"Yo' don't mean fight, does yo', I'sh?" said Pomp, meekly, hut with a queer glance in his rogulish eyes.

"Begorra I do that!"

"Yo' bettnh count forty afo' yo' gits in any fight wif me, sah. Jes' link it ober a lily bit. I don't want fo' to hurt yo', child!"

Pomp's game had worked well. He had succeeded admirably in getting Barney worked up to the right pitch. Now there would be some fun.

The Celt let out an angry snort and made a hiss at Pomp. The coon lowered his head and caught the blow.

It sounded like a wooden mallet crashing on an oaken plank. The coon only laughed and shook his head.

"Hit 'im ag'in, chile!" he cried. "Mah time come nex', sah!"

Again and again Barney gave the coon a fearful whack on the cranium. He only bruised his knuckles and made no impression whatever on the subject.

But as Pomp said, presently his time came.

Suddenly when Barney had nearly exhausted his strength he gave a sudden duck forward and drove his head into the Celt's stomach. Barney went down like a log and the coon on top of him.

Then followed the liveliest kind of a scrap. They rolled about, tugging and pauting, until finally exhausted they were compelled to desist.

A few minutes later the storm had passed and they were at their work once more, laughing and jollying each other in the merriest kind of a way.

The next day Frank Reade, Jr., appeared on the scene.

Then began the liveliest kind of preparations for getting the Electric Traveller ready for the great Siberian expedition. No time was wasted.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE ORIENT.

The Electric Traveller stood upon its stocks in the great storage building of the machine works. It was, however, completed in every detail.

In its construction Frank had aimed to build a vehicle in which he could travel with comparative ease across a rough and perilous country.

The Traveller was light, and yet very strong. The body was of bullet proof, though thinly rolled steel. In shape the Traveller was unlike any ordinary wheeled vehicle.

It was long and narrow, with high sides pierced by various plate glass windows and loopholes. Forward was the pilot house in the shape of a locomotive cab reversed. Thick glass windows were in the front of this.

In this pilot house was the electric keyboard which governed the engines, and by which the machine was guided and manipulated.

Back of the pilot house was a deck extending to the main cabin, so called.

This deck was covered with a bullet proof wire screening, also pierced with loopholes. On warm days this deck was a safe and comfortable place to abide.

The main cabin was a square structure with an upper deck protected by guard rails of brass. This cabin was furnished richly and comfortably. A powerful electric search-light occupied the upper deck.

In the main body of the machine were the sleeping berths, the cooking galley and storerooms. Every need was provided for.

The running gear of the Traveller was of ingenious construction. The springs were of rubber, and so made that but little jar was felt over the roughest ground. Four wheels were under the machine and these were so made that paddles could be applied for the fording of streams or sharp knives for the cutting of a way through jungles.

But the great invention of all was the wonderful electric gun. Two of these were aboard the Traveller, fore and aft. They were simply light, thin steel tubes with air chambers capable of expelling a dynamite shell a great distance, and they were operated by electricity.

The explosion of one of these shells was fearful to witness. A small army of men might be exterminated at a blow.

It was with this vehicle that Frank Reade, Jr., proposed to cross Asia and explore the dreaded Desert of Death. Certainly he would embark upon his project with all the necessary provision against the perils of the region.

For a day or two Frank was very busy with his preparations for departure. In due course of time, however, all was made ready.

The Traveller was cleverly packed in sections aboard the cars and shipped to the steamer's dock in New York. A stanch little vessel, the Cygnet, had been chartered for the voyage to Constantinople.

There Daniel Sharpe was on hand, and saw that the machine was properly stowed away in the steamer's hold. He wired Frank when this was accomplished.

And so it happened that the next day Frank Reade, Jr., with Barney and Pomp, arrived in New York and went aboard the steamer. Daniel Sharpe awaited them there.

Captain Brant, of the Cygnet, was all ready, and only awaited the command to sail. A little after the noon hour the Cygnet dropped out from her dock and put to sea.

There was no demonstration whatever. Thousands might have been at the dock to see the party off had the facts been known.

But Frank had kept all very quiet, and only his own people in Rendestown knew of the project. So, few who saw the Cygnet leave her dock that day suspected her real destination, or that she carried a famous party of explorers to the Orient.

It was not long before they were out of sight of land, and only the madly tossing waters of the Atlantic were about them. The great undertaking was begun.

Daniel Sharpe was in the highest of spirits. He could only walk the deck and talk enthusiastically of the possibilities of the expedition.

"We can hardly guess what we may find in that desert," he declared. "No other living beings of the human species at least will be able to say that they have explored it."

"What do you fancy we shall find?" asked Frank, with interest.

The explorer shook his head.

"That I cannot say," he answered; "hut the possibilities are great. Of course, the natives have all sorts of traditions. They fancy that a great sea exists far in the middle of the desert, whose sands are streaked with gold. Others speak of a race of strange people who live in the foot hills, and are very savage and war-like. There are tales of a deserted city and many legends, too numerous to recount."

"None of which are reliable?"

"A very few. It is not impossible that a salt lake or some basin of water may be found in the desert."

"Ah!"

"But as a general thing, I think that only plains and dunes of black sand exist there, save where basaltic rock makes a series of foot hills. One's impression upon first viewing the desert, is by no means a pleasant one. The great black expanse of shifting sand, generally overhung by a dark and cheerless sky, gives one a sense of depression. You pause at its verge and go no further. A powerful instinct even turns the wild animals back. Few invade that region."

The Cygnet encountered but one really hard storm on her way across the Atlantic. She weathered this in good fashion, and in due course sighted Gibraltar, and found her way into the Mediterranean.

The sail through the Blue Sea was most delightful, the islands of the Archipelago especially furnishing beautiful spectacles. Many points of interest were viewed.

Provided with the necessary papers it was not difficult to reach Constantinople. Here the waters of the Black Sea were spread to view.

The Cygnet and her captain were taken leave of. Then Daniel Sharpe, being by no means a stranger in the city of the Crescent, began to bargain for transportation across the Black Sea.

The necessary point to be reached was a small port called Krako. At length Suleiman el Kadir, a master of commerce on the Black Sea, offered one of his vessels for what seemed a reasonable sum. It was a Turkish affair and did not seem altogether seaworthy.

But the ship-master readily secured insurance on the cargo, so the deal was made and the Traveller was soon stored away aboard the Sultan II, as the craft was named.

The vessel boasted of sails, but these as it transpired were little used, except in a light breeze, the material being of most rotten sort.

The principal power of propulsion being afforded by long sweeps manipulated by a dozen of villainous-looking and dirty Turkish sailors as the human eye ever rested upon.

But under these sweeps the Sultan II. moved along at a fair rate of speed. It was a novel adventure for our travelers and they rather enjoyed it.

It was near nightfall when the Sultan II. swung out from the harbor and started on her voyage. But Captain Suleiman assured the passengers in his seductive way that the Black Sea was more easily navigated after dark, especially when so valuable a cargo was aboard.

"What the deuce does he mean?" asked Frank of Sharpe; "is there any risk in crossing the Black Sea?"

"Not in this vicinity," replied the distinguished traveler, "but occasionally you will run afoaf of a pirate as you near the northern coast whither we are bound. Our captain knows this and has adopted every precaution."

Here was an unexpected state of affairs. Frank was quite surprised.

"It is true that I have heard of pirates in the Black Sea!" he declared, "but I supposed of late that the Sultan with his boasted navy had suppressed everything of that sort."

Sharpe laughed at this.

"The Sultan has no navy to speak of!" he declared; "the pirates can bid him defiance. Don't you know that the natural inclination of a Turk is toward piracy anyway?"

"Of course!" agreed Frank. "Well, it behooves us to stand on our guard. Are we in good shape for defense?"

"I think we might get out our rifles and some cartridges on the sly," suggested Sharpe. "We must not let Suleiman or any of the crew suspect our purpose. Half the time these Turkish coasters are in league with the pirates."

"Do you believe that?"

"I know it. It may be that our shipmaster is an honest man, but in any event, if we were hoarded by pirates, we would have to fight it out alone."

"Why is that?"

"These dogs at the sweeps are the greatest cowards on earth. They would lie down in their shambles and be butchered before offering resistance. But four of us with good Winchesters would make a good fight."

"Then we had better be prepared," said Frank.

"There is plenty of time," said Sharpe. "We are not yet out of the harbor. Wait until near midnight and we are far out to sea; then we can work quietly."

Barney and Pomp were made acquainted with the state of affairs. They did not evince a particle of fear. Indeed, they seemed rather to enjoy the prospect.

"Begorra," exclaimed the Celt, "if we were to get out the electric gun, sure I think we'd be after making them sick!"

"Golly! I done wish we could!" said Pomp.

"The Winchesters will do," declared Sharpe. "I have no doubt we can repulse any attack made upon us. We must, however, look out for treachery."

"Treachery?" exclaimed Frank; "do you really suspect Suleiman?"

"We must suspect everybody and everything in an enemy's country," replied Sharpe, "or rather in a foreign land. Ostensibly they are friends, at heart they are our enemies."

Frank was inclined to agree perfectly with Sharpe. The voyagers loitered about the deck in an unconcerned way and later went below on the pretense of turning in.

They left the shipmaster Suleiman on the deck, hurling Turkish oaths at the menials at the sweep oars. He had betrayed in no manner the possibility of a leaguiship with pirates. All outward semblance was of the most honest sort.

But exciting events were in store before the dawn.

Frank and Sharpe, rolled up comfortably in rugs, lay near the foot of the cabin stairs. Barney and Pomp were but a few feet distant. None of the party were asleep.

They had been below decks a couple of hours. Suddenly, in the companionway opening, a dark face appeared. It hung there a moment in the lantern's light.

Then Suleiman, for he it was, came down the ladder like a cat.

He stood like a statue for a moment, as if to make sure that he was not heard. Then he passed from one to another of our adventurers, peering into their faces.

It was a critical moment, but as by common assent each one feigned sleep. The shipmaster gilded back silently to the companionway.

Up the ladder he went to the deck.

Then Frank Reade, Jr., rose upon his elbow. His companion followed suit. It was a moment of intense excitement.

"Now is our time if ever," whispered Sharpe. "I don't know what that old Turk meant, but I do know that something is up. We must be ready."

CHAPTER III.

TREACHERY.

"Right!" agreed Frank. "We might as well have the Winchesters in our hands and be ready."

With this Barney and Pomp arose and glided away through the hold to where the effects of the Traveller were packed. The fire-arms were in a long chest, of which Barney had the key.

In a few moments they had brought out four repeating rifles and

four cartridge belts. Barney could have ransacked further for smaller arms. But the Winchesters were considered sufficient.

They now felt well protected. Four sixteen-shot repeating rifles in the hands of four men was a battery not to be despised.

"Let the dogs of Turks come on!" whispered Sharpe, excitedly. "We will give them a hot reception."

"Indeed we will," agreed Frank; "they will think they have run up against something."

Crouched in the hold of the Sultan II., they awaited events.

An hour passed. Then once more the dark face appeared at the cabin stairs. For a moment it hovered there in a listening attitude.

Then the ship began to undergo a peculiar motion. She pitched harder, and the groaning of the oars upon one side ceased altogether.

"What's up?" whispered Frank.

"She is coming about," replied Sharpe; "they are changing their course. I've a mind to go out on deck to see what is the trouble."

"I'll go with you," said Frank.

This move was decided upon. Barney and Pomp were to follow at the least sound of a struggle.

Up the ladder the two explorers climbed leisurely, carrying their rifles with them. The scene viewed on deck was a peculiarly startling one.

A light from a great lamp on the mainmast flooded the forward deck. In the deep alleys on each side, the long rows of sweepsmen stood.

A gentle breeze was blowing across the sea. The moon made all as plain as day, and just to leeward another vessel was seen. Land was nowhere in sight.

Forward in the extreme bow stood Suleiman and half a dozen of the chosen members of his crew. They were swinging a lantern, and making signals apparently to the other vessel.

This was proved plainly enough when the light of a waving lantern was seen on the deck of the other ship. For a moment Frank and Sharpe gazed with interest.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank, "they are signaling that vessel."

"That is precisely the case," said Sharpe.

"I wonder what the game is?"

"I cannot say as yet."

"Is it not odd that they do not speak her, as is the usual custom?"

"There may be a good reason for that," declared Sharpe. "We shall soon find out what it is!"

"What do you make of that ship? Why should Suleiman lay alongside of her?"

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"She may be a coaster like the Sultan II., and in that case all would be right. But down in my heart I believe that she is a confounded pirate!"

"A pirate?"

"Yes."

"Then this Suleiman is a rascal and is in league with the villains!"

"That is it!"

There was an interval of silence. Then Frank impatiently took a step forward.

"I am not as well acquainted with these Turks as you are, Sharpe. But I think something ought to be done very soon."

"I'm with you!" said Sharpe.

"What shall we do?"

"Call the old fellow to account."

With their rifles held carelessly under their arms, Frank and Sharpe walked leisurely forward. Not until they were within a very few feet of the Turkish captain was he made aware of their presence.

Then he turned like a flash. His amazement and consternation was comical.

"Soul of the Prophet," he gasped in Turkish. "I thought you asleep, noble Effendis. What can your slave do?"

Sharpe faced the old wretch in a decided manner, and jerking his thumb toward the other vessel, asked in the Turkish language:

"What craft is that?"

Suleiman was livid and trembling. He saw that his two passengers were armed, and he began to whine.

"Ah, most noble Effendi, do not blame honest Suleiman. We are hard beset by the blood-thirsty Ali Bouari, the most dreaded of all Black Sea pirates. He spares the lives of none who resist him. It is our only hope to surrender!"

"What, you unconscionable old scoundrel!" roared Sharpe; "were you not signalling him just now?"

Suleiman prostrated himself.

"Oh, have pity, Effendi!" he groaned. "I dared not refuse. It was to spare your lives and mine!"

"Get up, you filthy dog!" said Sharpe, contemptuously; "you deserve a hanging. Dare you tell me that you would have allowed those wretches to board this ship, and also permitted them to creep down the cabin stairs and cut our throats?"

"Mercy, Effendi! You know not Ali Bouari!"

"I know you for a treacherous dog. I know that you are in league with those cut-throats. But your game did not work. We saw you come down into the cabin to see if we were asleep!"

Suleiman's face was like that of a dead man, so great was his terror. He saw that he was unmasked.

Sharpe gave a whistle. In a moment Barney and Pomp were on deck.

"Now you black dog!" roared the distinguished traveler, giving the

shipmaster a savage kick, "we are all armed with repeating rifles and can shoot you down like sheep! Give word to your oarsmen to row us for Krako the quickest possible way, or your lives will pay for it! Live! before that pirate gets aboard!"

Suleiman hesitated, but the black muzzle of Sharpe's gun looked him in the face. It was useless to resist.

So he gave the order.

The black galley slaves gave way with a will. The Sultan II. shot away from the pirate vessel. A chorus of maddened yells came from the latter.

They no doubt suspected treachery on Suleiman's part, and at once a great uproar arose. They came swiftly in angry pursuit.

"Make your men row faster!" cried Sharpe, and the frightened Suleiman gave the order.

Away through the darkness went the chase. The pirate seemed bound to overtake the Sultan II., and seemed to be rapidly gaining.

This angered Sharpe, who threatened the shipmaster. But now it became a trifle dangerous on deck.

The pirates had opened fire upon the fleeing ship. Bullets whistled across the deck in lively fashion.

Frank, however, was equal to this emergency. Some of the ship's cargo, heavy bundles and bales, were piled up in the stern to make a high bulwark.

Behind this Barney and Pomp stood and returned the fire. Of course it was at random, but many shots told, as was evidenced by the yells of agony from the pirate's deck.

Frank paraded the deck forward and menaced the oarsmen.

And thus the mad race went on through the night. It was hard to tell which had the best of it. At times the pirate ship came quite near, and then fell back.

When daylight came the pirate's deck could be seen to be crowded with rough, wild-looking men. If they had once boarded the Sultan II., our adventurers would have had scant show. The Electric Traveller would have never finished her great trip to the Desert of Death, and this story never have been written.

But with daylight the battle became a hot one.

The exhausted slaves at the oars could hardly make the big vessel move. The pirate gained slowly.

But Barney and Pomp were now able to use better aim, and every bullet counted. The deck of the pirate vessel was red with blood.

It seemed as if the battle must, however, come to close quarters. This would be disastrous for our adventurers as they could plainly see.

Frank now joined Barney and Pomp, and Sharpe held surveillance over Suleiman and his crew. Thus far none of our adventurers had received a scratch.

But now Barney lost the tip of his little finger, and Frank received a slight flesh wound in the neck. The fire was getting close.

The rifles were deadly at long range, but the Turkish guns had been of little service until now, that they had come to close quarters.

Matters had begun to look ominous, when a gong pealed on the deck of the pirate ship. Instantly her head came about, her heavy sail swung over and her oarsmen began to pull away at an angle.

The chase was over.

The pirate, having nearly overtaken her would-be prey, had suddenly abandoned the chase. Why this was, it was not easy to say. But an explanation was at hand.

Suleiman pointed to windward with a guttural exclamation. A sail was seen several miles away, and bearing down upon them.

It seemed that succor was coming. The new-comer proved to be one of the Sultan's cruisers, commissioned to find and hang Ali Bouari.

They hailed the Sultan II., and then bore away in hot pursuit. Soon pirate and cruiser vanished below the horizon.

Never was a whipped cur more servile or abject than Suleiman now. He faithfully promised to make Krako before another dawn.

Sharpe was highly incensed.

"I feel like throwing the miserable dog overboard!" he gritted. "It would be only his just deserts."

"It would be eminently proper, did we know the way to Krako!" said Frank.

The voyagers had good reason for mutual congratulations. They had met and defeated one of the most noted pirates of the Black Sea.

They had come out of the conflict comparatively unscathed. The incident was good preparation for what was to come.

As Suleiman had agreed they made Krako the next morning. Here the treacherous shipmaster was paid off and allowed to go, which was clever treatment for him.

The electric Traveller, all in sections, had been transported to the shore. It was all ready for adjustment.

A great crowd of Caucasians, Kurds, and a heterogeneous mass of innumerable barbarians crowded down to the little quay to witness the landing of the travelers. Wild, savage-looking wretches they were in their costumes of various sorts. The Kurds were fanciful in red and gold. The Armenians wore the Turkish fez. But the wild Kirghiz and the savage wolf hunters of the Steppes wore only the skins of wild beasts. A fierce-looking crew they were.

CHAPTER IV.

Held up by thieves.

But our travelers had little reason to fear them.

The Turkish consul and the Russian governor of the town came down in a pompous way, to inspect the passports which Frank had secured in Constantinople. After this there was no difficulty.

Barney and Pomp quickly unpacked the sections of the machine and began to adjust them. The ring of hammer on steel filled the air.

After settling with the authorities, Frank and Daniel Sharpe lent a hand. Very soon the body of the Traveller was joined together and placed upon the running gear.

The electric engines and batteries were all right, and in a few hours the machine was complete. Then followed the work of putting the stores and equipments aboard and setting things to rights.

This consumed the rest of the day, so that the start was deferred until the next morning. The night was spent aboard the Traveller on the quay.

The search-light's glare lit up the vicinity, and precluded any possibility of an attack from sneak thieves. Yet all night savage-looking fellows hovered about the spot.

"If it were not for the Sultan's orders which we have we might expect trouble with those chaps," said Sharpe, "but that alone keeps them in check."

"That would be unpleasant," declared Frank.

"Indeed it would right here and now. But we may look for some experiences with the Kirghiz, all of whom are robbers, when we get up into the mountains. It will be well to be prepared."

"Bejabers, they'll niver want to thry aay av their gamos nfter the electhric guns get aafter thim!" declared Barney.

"Golly!" sniffed Pomp; "I done fink dat a lily bit ob de Winchesters make dem sick."

"I am of that opinion myself," agreed Frank.

But Daniel Sharpe shook his head.

"These fellows are brave and reckless in battle," he said. "It would never do to take chances with them."

"We will proceed with all caution, then," said Frank. "By the way, are there plenty of passes in the Caucasus?"

"I have learned of one which will take us over to the plain of the Kuban river. It is a small stream, and once across that we can strike due northeast for the delta of the Volga. The country is extremely low and marshy, and I should advise holding a northerly course to the Russian town of Sarepta at the head of the delta. We can cross there and then we must cross a very low plain to the Ural. After that comes the Steppes and no further difficulty."

With this route so carefully mapped out the travelers felt confident. Sharpe had traveled this region in younger life and was fairly familiar with it.

The next morning at an early hour the Electric Traveller was under way.

She quickly left Krako behind, and passing many small hats and scattering hamlets where life was conducted in a wretched fashion, they in due time found themselves in the passes of the Caucasus.

Great cliffs rose upon either side with defiles and elefts innumerable. The forest growth was scraggy and sparse. In fact it was just such a spot as one would expect to encounter Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves of Arabian night's fame.

There seemed to Frank Reade, Jr., one great peril in threading these defiles. There was admirable opportunity for a foe to roll heavy stones down upon the machine from far above.

Of course this would be a serious matter for the Traveller. One huge boulder might disable it and leave the occupants at the mercy of the barbarian foe.

So a sharp watch was kept of these heights. Barney and Pomp, with rifles ready, sat in the pilot house scanning the cliff heights closely.

But whether the robbers overlooked this method of attack or deemed it unnecessary it was not easy to say, but they certainly did not adopt it.

Frank was at the steering lever, and Sharpe was near him, when suddenly the young inventor swept the lever back and brought the machine to a full stop.

"Jovel!" exclaimed Sharpe, "it has come!"

These words expressed the idea exactly. The critical moment had come.

As if by magic a body of horsemen appeared in the defile.

A more villainous-looking crew could hardly be imagined. The worst types of Oriental rascallism were represented.

Every man was armed to the teeth. They sat immovably upon their Tartar horses directly in the path of the machine. They blocked the entire pass, making a human barrier not to be despised.

For a moment our adventurers critically studied them. Then Frank exclaimed:

"By Jupiter! I never saw a rougher looking crew in my life. It is lucky that we are well protected."

"If we were afoot, our throats would be cut from ear to ear," said Sharpe.

"I believe you."

"What am yo' gwine to do, Marse Frank?" asked Pomp.

"Wait a few moments and let us see what action they will make," said Frank.

"Here it comes!" ejaculated Sharpe.

One of the barbarians now ambled his horse forward. He was apparently the leader of the party.

He held up one hand in token of a truce. Frank recognized it, and stepped out onto the forward deck.

Then the parley began.

"Well?" asked Frank in the best Turkish he could demand.

"What will you have, Effendi?"

"By the beard of Allah!" exclaimed the robber chief. "You have

invaded the land of our sires and as fortune you must pay for it. We demand a ransom."

Frank replied with dignity.

"We travel with passports from both the Turkish and Russian governments. If you interfere with us, you hang for it!"

A scornful laugh was the reply.

"Know that passports are of no account in these hills, Efendi. If you refuse to pay ransom we must seize your chariot and death will be your portion!"

Frank saw that it was of no use whatever to attempt argument. There was no doubt but that the mountain robbers meant to seize the machine and confiscate everything of value.

"Then those are your best terms?" asked Frank.

"They are, Efendi. Do you yield?"

"How large a ransom do you require?"

"Ten thousand piasters!"

Frank knew that this was no very large sum, the piaster representing only about five cents. But he had no thought of paying even so small an amount for ransom.

In the first place he did not deem it necessary, and again he did not believe in the sincerity of the robbers. After they had got the piasters they would demand more, or work some treacherous game to get all into their power.

Assured of this, the young inventor had no idea of knuckling to the foe. But he fenced with the truce bearer to gain time.

"Your request is exorbitant," he replied. "We will not accede to it, sirrah."

The face of the robber grew black.

"Then you refuse?" he asked.

"Can you make no better terms?"

"None, sirrah."

"It will be well for you to clear the pass and let us go on," said Frank, persuasively. "We are armed and can make a hard fight. You will rue the moment you attack us."

The robber truce bearer laughed scornfully.

"Take the consequences then, Efendi!" he yelled. "May your blood be upon your own heads! Death is your portion!"

With which he wheeled his horse and dashed away up the pass. Frank went back into the pilot house.

"It means a battle," said Sharpe.

"Yes!"

"I think we can give them a rich lesson!"

"So do I!"

"It would have been impossible to treat with them anyway."

"Oh, certainly! If we had attempted such a thing, they would have tried some treacherous game."

With this, preparations were at once made for defense. Frank could have used the forward electric gun and swept the foe from his path like flies.

But it would mean terrible slaughter, and to this he was much averse. He preferred to give the foe a mild beating with as little bloodshed as possible.

So, with their Winchesters and plenty of ammunition at hand, the defenders of the Traveller awaited the attack. It was not long in coming.

The robbers filled the defile with their savage yells. Then they came on to the attack.

Galloping madly up within a few yards of the machine, they threw themselves from their horses' backs, and rushed forward on foot to board the Traveller.

"Now!" cried Frank Read, Jr.; "this is our time. Give it to them!"

The Winchesters cracked with deadly effect. The repeaters were worked just as rapidly as possible. It was a steady volley of the most deadly sort.

Human courage could not face such a deadly fire. The robbers wavered, fell back and fled, leaving full a dozen of their number dead behind them.

"Hurrah!" cried Sharpe. "We have given them a good beating. Victory is ours."

Barney and Pomp cheered lustily. They were thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the affair.

The robbers hastily sought refuge behind an angle in the pass. But Frank moved the Traveller forward.

The Winchesters kept the pass so full of flying bullets that the robbers were compelled to ride hard to keep out of range. The attack upon the Traveller was a failure.

Through the intricate defiles the pursuit went, until finally the great cliffs began to lower and the open country was seen beyond.

Later in the day the Caucasus range was low on the horizon, and the machine was speeding over low, moist plains, on its way to Sarepta and the head of the Volga's delta.

For days the Traveller picked its way across the low area, fording streams and skirting lakes, until finally the great Russian river came to view.

It was very broad and marshy at this point, but Frank determined to try a crossing.

He did not venture to visit Sarepta, for he did not know what trouble he might become involved in there with the somewhat obtuse Russian authorities. So the Traveller slid into the waters of the Volga and the great feat was begun of crossing this mighty river.

The paddles were thrown out from the machine of the wheels and she swung out into the current. For a time it was a hard fight to make any headway.

When the opposite shore was reached it was at a point full five miles below and nearer the Caspian Sea. But a safe landing was made. It only remained now to cross the Ural river to gain the region of the Steppes.

CHAPTER V.

AMONG THE KIRGHIZ.

Asia seemed now quite near at hand. The spirits of the voyagers were greatly revived, for one of the greatest obstacles of the trip had been overcome.

No time was lost in once more getting under way. But if the area of depression from the Black Sea to the Volga was marked, that upon which they now entered was doubly marked.

Swamps almost impassable lay to the southward. The travelers were obliged to keep continually working northward.

The country was wretched and almost depopulated. There was little sustenance for human life in such a barren region.

But in due course of time all these obstacles were happily overcome, and the machine one day came out of a forest upon the banks of a widely rolling river. This was the Ural.

Beyond this was Asia. The river was the dividing line.

The Ural did not prove so hard a stream to cross as the Volga. The machine and the travelers were soon upon the opposite side.

As it was a pleasant spot in the shade of a grove of trees, Frank decided to make a half day's halt here to rest, and also to regulate the machinery of the Traveller. The others were glad of this.

It gave Barney and Pomp an opportunity to go duck shooting, for game was very plentiful in the vicinity. Daniel Sharpe began to map out a new and shorter route across the Steppes to the Desert of Death.

The next day the journey was resumed. The machine was soon bowling away across the smooth surface of the Steppes.

A wild, desolate region was now spread to view.

To the east and south lay the uncivilized regions of Turkestan; to the west, the mighty chain of the Ural mountains.

Every boner now drew them nearer the wilds of Siberia.

For two days the machine bowled along without encountering any sign of human life. At night the wolves came in immense droves about the machine, and made the night hideous with their howls.

In their voracious hunger they even ventured to make an effort to come aboard the Traveller. But as a general thing the bright glare of the search-light kept them off.

Thus matters went on, until on the third day the machine began to descend a long slope into a deep sink or depression many miles long.

A great lake or inland sea was seen some distance away to the eastward, and Daniel Sharpe remarked this fact.

"I'll wager this depression was once the bed of a lake such as that," he said; "the whole topography of the country would proclaim it."

"I have no doubt of it," agreed Frank; "hello! what is that down there?"

He pointed to the center of the depression. The glimmer of water, probably a small basin of water, showed through green foliage. But in the verge of the clump of trees were a number of dwellings.

These were of the rudest description, some of them being simply tents of the skins of wild beasts hung upon poles. But they showed that at last human habitations had been found.

That these natives were Kirghiz there was no manner of doubt. Nomads pure and simple.

Flocks of goats and sheep fed upon the green slope. These were guarded by mounted men and dogs.

No wolf dared venture within calling distance of a Kirghiz settlement. Those people were ardent hunters of the scavengers of the Steppes.

With their fleet little Tartary horses they could run down and lasso any wolf. In a trice off would come his skin, and it would furnish either clothing or material for a dwelling.

So the sheep and goats, driven from place to place, were eyed, no doubt, longingly by the ravenous wolf, but the latter knew better than to venture an attack. The loss of his soft coat would be the certain result.

The Kirghiz are perhaps the wildest and most untamable nomads of the Steppes.

In the presence of a superior force they are sullenly peaceable. But when the advantage of numbers or position lies with them, they never fail to take it, and as robbers and cut-throats Asia does not furnish their equal. The Kurds, their more civilized, but no less villainous prototypes, alone approach them.

As the machine entered the depression, it was of course at once seen by the barbarians. The effect upon them was somewhat surprising.

The little camp was instantly in an uproar.

It was safe enough to assert that full two-thirds of the residents had never before seen a wheeled vehicle. Therefore, the Traveller was a revelation to them.

They began to huddle in the clump of trees, and some ran precipitately toward the other end of the depression. The Traveller quickly came to a stop one hundred yards from the grove.

The Kirghiz could be seen for some while skulking among the trees. But finally one of their number ventured to come out.

He showed himself carefully at first, with both arms upraised in token of amity. Then he slowly walked toward the machine.

It was evident that he had been selected as the spokesman of the party. The others kept back under cover.

In appearance the Kirghiz made as pronounced a type of primitive man as one could well imagine. He was only half clad in the tattered pieces of wolf skin, but his form was intensely muscular.

The cords of his arms and back, as well as of his calves, were knotted hugely. He was a savage Hercules.

His face was brutish in its cast, with black, deep-set eyes and hair of the most raven black. A comic cap set fantastically upon his head.

He came on until quite near the Traveller. Frank and Sharpe were at the rail. The Kirghiz spokesman bowed low in the fashion of his people and spoke in a grum voice. To the surprise of our adventurers he spoke in the Turkish language.

Had it been otherwise he could not have made himself understood, for the lingo of the Steppes is incomprehensible.

"I salute thee, noble Effendi," he said, suavely; "the blessing of Allah wait upon thee. Whence comest thou and what wilt thou ask of the poor Kirghiz?"

"We salute you, Effendi!" replied Frank. "We ask nothing of you and your people but friendship."

The Kirghiz spokesman for a moment seemed surprised. Then he bowed almost to the earth.

"Allah preserve thee," he replied. "We are enemies to none!"

"I am glad to hear that," replied Frank, bluntly; "but how does it happen that you, a Kirghiz, can speak the Turkish language so well? Were you ever in Turkey?"

Again the Kirghiz bowed.

"That I was, noble Effendi," he replied. "Was I not captured in battle with the accursed Kurds, and carried to Constantinople where I dwelt in slavery many years? Happy the day for Ali Mahmoo when he escaped and returned to his people!"

"The fellow is quite intelligent," said Sharpe; "probably we can make friends with this tribe through him. I am glad of that, for we are not far from the Desert of Death, and maybe these Kirghiz can tell us something about it."

"Good," agreed Frank. "Will you not talk with him?"

"If you wish."

With this, Sharpe began a lively conversation with the fellow. In a short while Ali Mahmoo became very friendly, and even ventured aboard the machine.

When he learned that the travelers were Americans from a far part of the earth, and not Turks or Russians, he was completely restored in confidence. He at once unbosomed himself.

And the rest of the Kirghiz tribe, upon learning that they were not to be attacked or carried into slavery, came out of their hiding and manifested great friendliness.

The tribe was not a large one, Ali Mahmoo being the chief. There were perhaps three hundred souls in all.

The women and children kept at a respectful distance, but the men came boldly up to the machine. Powerful barbarians they were.

Frank greeted them all pleasantly. He showed them many electrical marvels, which to them were simply miraculous.

Ali Mahmoo had heard much of the Desert of Death. He was anxious to accompany the Traveller to its borders.

As grazing was good, even to the borders of the desert, the rest of the tribe readily agreed to transport their settlement thither. Frank would have dissuaded them, but Sharpe said:

"Let them go. It is possible that they may be of much assistance to us."

In the meanwhile Barney and Pomp had struck up a jolly acquaintance with the Kirghiz huntsmen. Though neither understood the tongue of the other, they managed to converse in a comical manner by means of motions and signs.

The Kirghiz seemed to take a great fancy to the two jokers. There were many jests and much laughter.

Barney and Pomp were invited to witness a "huly guly," as the Kirghiz called it. A hundred or more expert horsemen on their little black ponies performed all manner of feats.

They rode under their horses' necks, sitting on their haunches, or standing on their heads in the saddle, picking up small articles at full speed, and many other tricks too numerous to enumerate.

Then a captive wolf was liberated and rare sport followed. A mad race began to head off the beast and see which should first place the long halter or lasso about his neck.

In the scramble many horses went down in a heap. But they were up and the riders on their backs again in a twinkling.

The wolf, headed off in one direction, whirled about and shot away in another. It was no easy matter to corner him.

And so the exciting chase went on until one side or the other won. In the end the victor claimed the wolf's pelt.

"Bejabers, naygar!" cried Barney, "it's a sorry pair we are that we can't show this a bit av riding ourselves. Phwat kin yez do?"

"Golly!" exclaimed the coon. "It am jes' as natural fo' me to ride a horse as it am to breathe, sah."

"Yez don't say! Well, now, we'll try it," cried the Celt; "pick out a horse an' I'll do the same share."

"A'right," agreed the dandy; "I'll take dat flea bitten grny pony."

"All roight. I'll take the black an' whoite."

The Kirghiz seemed only too delighted to have the two jokers come into the game. The horses named were selected.

But when they were led out one of the Kirghiz by eloquent signs tried to prevail upon the two jokers not to attempt to ride them. In fact, he endeavored to show that they were tricky and thoroughly bad.

CHAPTER VI.

A DASHING PAIR OF RIDERS.

BUT Barney was not to be abashed by such a representation. His fine Hibernian blood was up, and as he looked the horse over critically, he cried:

"Shure, the horse niver was born and throw an O'Shea. It's a good chance to show yez how an Orlishmun kin rode. Yez should have seen me when I won the Tipperary stakes wunst. Shure, they all said I was the finest rider in Oireland."

Pomp hesitated when he looked at the eyes of the flea-bitten gray, for they were wicked.

But he caught the contemptuous smile which Barney gave him. That settled it.

All the Kirghiz horsemen gathered about. They looked ominous enough when the saddle was placed upon Barney's horse.

But the Celt was as cool and matter-of-fact as could be. He laughed gayly as he stepped lightly forward and vaulted upon his steed's back.

Pomp at once hacked the gray. The two horses stood as motionless as marble statues.

Barney flitted his feet into the stirrups, and then said:

"G'lang, yez misfit!"

Then something happened.

The Celt was ready to take his oath afterwards that the black horse stood on his head, and then turned flip-flop. However it was, he sailed lightly as a feather into a heap of brambles some yards away.

Pomp's eyes were like saucers when he saw this. He was so interested and intent upon watching the gymnastics of the Celt, that he never thought of speaking to his steed at all. So he simply sat still in the saddle and was safe.

The Kirghiz standing about nearly had a fit. They shook their barbarian sleeves and roared.

Barney scrambled out of the bushes as quickly as he could. For a moment he was crestfallen.

He shook himself, adjusted a crick in his back, and looked at the black and white pony. He looked small enough to fit nicely into the Celt's pocket.

Barney was stumped for the moment. But the laughter which he witnessed roused his dander again, and he was determined not to give up.

"Bejabers, I niver was beat by a horse yet, not to say a pony," he muttered. Then he saw Pomp looking at him with a broad grin.

That settled it.

"I see waitin' fo' yo', mnh friend!" cried the coon. "Am yo' comin' to ride?"

"Bejabers, I am that!" cried the Celt. "I hope yez will be after pardoning the delay, sor."

With which Barney again leaped onto the black pony's back. This time he adopted new tactics.

He knew that the process by which he had been evicted from the saddle, was simply that which is known on the plains of the wild West as "bucking."

So he simply lengthened the reins, and placing both hands behind him, gripped the back of the saddle. Then he once more sucked his tooth, and said:

"G'lang!"

Again the same display of pyrotechnics. But this time the Celt stuck. The pony was unable to get him off. He hung to the saddle like grim fate.

Pomp had adopted both tactics and the two ponies bucked only in vain. Then they tried other methods. It was an exhibition which delighted the Kirghiz.

"Begorra, yez will niver get me off this toime," cried Barney, "sure I have the best av yez!"

"I'll bet yo' mah hat yo' gits off fust," yelled Pomp.

"I'll take yez!" retorted Barney.

Then something new happened.

Both ponies shot off at right angles on the mad run. Neither rider made any effort to check them.

And they did run like greyhounds. But suddenly each turned in a circle.

With their heads down there was no telling what would follow. Neither seemed to see the other. At any rate they shot toward each other like catpawls.

The Kirghiz lifted their hands and yelled a warning.

Too late!

Pomp's grey struck the black pony in the flanks. In an instant men and horses were in a heap. For a moment the great cloud of dust hid them.

The first feeling was one of alarm for fear that the luckless riders had come to harm. But as the dust cleared a really comical scene was revealed.

The two ponies were racing with all speed in opposite directions across the plain. But they were riderless.

While facing each other stood the two riders, for they had hastily scrambled to their feet after the fall.

Pomp was holding his hands to a swelled eye, while Barney was nursing a terrific bruise on the cheek. Both were mad clear through.

"Howly mutther!" roared Barney. "Why didn't yez see phwat ye war doing? Shure, yez nearly kilt the both av us!"

"Golly!" howled Pomp; "how yo' talk? Does yo' link I see de one to blame?"

"Av course, yez was!"

"Don' yo' tell me dat, I'ish, I seen yo' pull yo' horse right in toward me. Yo' kain't ride nuffin'."

"It was yerself as pulled into me, ye black misfit."

"No, sah, I didn't!"

"Do yez call me a liar?"

"Yo' nm, if yo' say dat."

"Howly murder! I'll break the face av yez!"

"Yo' ain't de size kin do dat, sah!"

"Begorra, luk out fer yerself, naygur!"

And with this Baraey made a bluff at the coon. But Pomp caught it on his adamantiae head and nearly broke the Celt's hand.

Then Pomp put his head into Baraey's stomach so forcibly that he sat down like a thousand of bricks. The Celt grabbed the coon's legs and threw him. Then followed an old time scrap.

The Kirghiz crowded around overcome with laughter. To them it was the funniest thing they had ever seen.

And there were, indeed, comic features to it. The two jokers wrestled and tugged until they could struggle no longer.

Then they rolled apart. A few moments later they scrambled to their feet, and Pomp breathlessly asked:

"I've had satisfaction. How am it wif yo', I'ish?"

"Begorra, I was satisfied afther I had given yez that paste in the nut!" declared the Celt.

And so the affair terminated. But with the Kirghiz who seemed to have a keen sense of humor the two were ever after popular.

Meanwhile, Frank and Sharpe had finished their confab with Ali Mahmoo in regard to the nearest route to the Black Desert. They had just come out of the cabin on horseback when a startling thing occurred.

Down the deep valley came a Kirghiz rider. He was white faced and terror stricken, and lashed his horse furiously.

Up he came and flung himself from the saddle.

As soon as he could get his breath, he cried hoarsely:

"For your lives, flee everybody. The great White Lake is breaking through into this valley, and you will all be drowaed. Allah, preserve us!"

Of course this was delivered in the Kirghiz tongue. But with awful terror Ali Mahmoo repeated it in Turkish to Frank and Sharpe.

The effect upon all was most startling.

The women and children began to moan and wail piteously, and huddled all together in the clump of trees. The Kirghiz men seemed unnerved.

It would have been easy for them to have sprung upon their horses' backs and sought safety in mad flight. But there were their helpless ones the women and children.

To get them all out of the fated valley would take time, and delay would be fatal. There were fully one hundred and fifty of them in all.

"Allah forbid," cried Mahmoo, in agony. "We shall all perish!"

Already from the distant wall of the depression a sullen roar was heard. A white veil was seen hanging over.

It was the first column of water. The pressure would soon carry away further barrier, and then the valley would flood almost instantly.

The Kirghiz warriors now, however, began to show of what stuff they were made. Each man mounted a woman on his own horse with a child, and bade them ride for their lives. This would leave the men to make their way out on foot, which they would have but a faint chance of doing.

The situation, in all its phases, was a dreadful one. But Frank Reade, Jr. was seized with a sudden resolution.

He reckoned that the machine could carry easily over a score of the women and children by packing them tightly on the deck. The distance to a point of safety was about two miles.

Frank grasped Ali Mahmoo by the arm and imparted his plan to him.

The Kirghiz chief wept with his gratitude and joy.

"Allah will bless you!" he cried. "You will perform a noble deed."

At once the work began.

The women and children were quickly placed aboard. Then Frank sprang to the lever, and the Traveller was off.

On such a level surface the machine could travel almost as fast as a railway train. In less than three minutes the machine had reached the end of the valley.

Frank hoped that he would be able to make three trips. This, with the help of the Kirghiz riders, who each took a woman or child on his horse with him, would effect the rescue of all.

Of course the habitations and many of the effects of the nomads, would be lost; but life was dearer than all.

The load was quickly disembarked, and the Traveller flew back to the camp. When the second load was taken, the water was already creeping across the valley.

Swiftly the Traveller carried the second load to safety. The Kirghiz cheered and prayed with hope and joy.

But just as the Traveller turned about for its third trip, a fearful roar came down the valley. The great barrier was giving away.

Frank put on all speed. The number left at the camp were hardly twenty. But their lives were precious, and they must be saved.

The camp was reached safely. Quickly the remaining helpless ones were loaded on the Traveller's deck. Then down the valley a great wall of white and maddening waters were seen to be rolling.

Swifter than any race horse they were coming. The great wall rose in height every moment.

As it neared the camp it was full twenty feet in height. Inch by inch, step by step it overtook the Traveller. Should it swoop down upon the machine ere it reached the end of the valley, the fate of all would be sealed.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE HEART OF THE DESERT.

The Traveller ran like a spirit down the length of that valley. But the very spray from that awful wave was splashing the terrified passengers.

Water was already several inches deep under the wheels of the machine and was thrown aloft in sheets. Frank hung to the lever and steadied the machine.

Going out of the valley there was a long and gradual ascent. The machine, however, had gathered such momentum that it did not abate its speed a whit.

Up, up, and still inch by inch the great monster galloped.

Now it fairly yawped over the little machine. But fifty feet farther, up a sharp pitch shot the Traveller.

All was over.

The wave spent itself here. Another was behind it, but the Traveller was high and safe before it came.

In a few minutes more the entire valley had been transformed into a mighty sea of water of great depth.

But the nomads were safe. Everyone of them had escaped from the maws of an awful death.

Half of them at least would have been lost had it not been for the valiant work of the Electric Traveller.

And the Kirghiz, poor barbarians that they were, did not lack proper appreciation. They crowded about the Traveller's people, hugging their knees and making profuse demonstration of their gratitude.

It was needless to say that Frank Reade, Jr., had won the friendship and the hearty co-operation of this band of nomads. They would stick by him.

The encampment was a loss. But after all this was not great.

Aside from their horses, saddles and equipments and weapons which were all saved, there was little of value ever owned by the Kirghiz. Rude cooking utensils, skins and women's garments, and the huts of skins and bark were the only loss.

These could be easily replaced. So after all the Kirghiz did not greatly mind their misfortune.

But now there seemed all the more reason why they should change their base and so they decided to push on to the Desert of Death.

They besought Frank to allow them to keep alongside the Traveller. But as this would make progress very slow, Frank was obliged to offer a compromise.

He explained that the machine would push on to the borders of the desert, and there wait for the coming of the Kirghiz.

This was done.

The run was not a long one over the Steppes, and two days later the explorers came in sight of the mysterious desert.

Their first impression was one not easily forgotten.

There seemed a sense of desolation and loneliness in the very air which was bound to prey upon body and spirit. The sky was overhug, and the black, glistening sands stretching away like a great, dark ocean, was a gloomy spectacle.

Not one in the party but experienced a shiver.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank; "this is really a Desert of Death. It seems the very abode of death!"

"Just so!" cried Sharpe, triumphantly; "did I not tell you so? Yet fifty miles above here, upon the very verge of this awful waste, there is a smart little village of exiles, many of whom were once men of distinction in Russia. They never expect to see their native land again."

"Poor souls," exclaimed Frank, commiseratingly, "life must seem indeed a void to them."

"Not altogether so," replied Sharpe. "The exiles of Stepniak are not exactly convicts. They are not compelled to work for the Russian government, as those poor slaves in the mines of Irkutsk. They are exiles only; nothing more. Simply forbidden to reside in Russia or to leave Siberia."

"I should like to pay the place a visit," said Frank.

"We will endeavor to do so before we return from this region," said Sharpe. "Now, I suppose, to keep faith with Ali Mahmoo, we must wait here a few days."

"It is just as well," said Frank; "it will give me a chance to overhaul the batteries."

So the adventurers settled down to wait for the coming of the Kirghiz. In due course of time they arrived.

Their tents were pitched in a snug little green valley near fresh springs of clear pure water. The encampment was well provided with game, which they had secured on the way along.

And now Ali Mahmoo announced that he was ready to accompany the Traveller into the desert. A dozen strong, well tried Kirghiz with their horses were to form the party.

As soon as possible the start was made.

The machine rolled out across the desert. The yielding sands did not at once permit great speed. But Frank had no desire to travel fast.

The Kirghiz rode alongside on their hardy ponies. Food for them was carried on board the Traveller.

The first night encampment was made in a hollow of the desert.

All about on every hand naught was to be seen but a mighty waste of black sand. It was a desolate and forbidding outlook. The night was as dark as pitch. It was a strange experience. Out on the steppes there was loneliness, but always the howl of a wolf or the cry of some night bird was to be heard. But in this desert the stillness was fearfully oppressive. It was so mighty that it palled upon the senses. Not a breath of air rippled the surface of the sandy waste; not a star was seen overhead. The ears of the explorers rung with the awful silence. It almost induced mental depression.

"On my word!" exclaimed Frank Reade, Jr., "there is a very good reason for calling this the Desert of Death. It is rightly named." "You are right," said Sharpe, "and only think—we are bound to explore it fully and with perfect safety." The Kirghiz quickly made a camp in the desert waste. Feed for their ponies was taken from the deck of the Traveller. No fire was built, for there was no fuel to build it with. The glare of the search-light rested upon the little camp. There was no need of posting guards or protecting the horses. Certainly they had nothing to fear from man, and the wolf never ventured into the desert.

Few remained long awake. All were glad to retire at an early hour.

When the sun came up all were once more astir after their first night in the desert. Breakfast was partaken of, and then they pressed on again.

Thus far nothing worthy of note had occurred. It seemed as if the sole peril of the desert was death from thirst or starvation. Certainly there were no wild beasts or savage natives.

But just after the noon hour a low range of rocky foot-hills showed on the horizon. Not a bit of vegetation existed upon them.

They were huge blocks of basaltic rock and they were blackened and begrimed as if with the effects of a fire. In their center was a huge basin which closely resembled the extinct crater of a volcano. Barney suggested this, and Frank said:

"There is not the least doubt of it. This region was probably at one time all volcanic. This accounts for this curious black sand and the utter absence of vegetation."

The machine ran into the crater and was surrounded by the huge black walls of rock.

While the travelers were studying these suddenly Barney's attention was attracted by a distant gleam of white in the black expanse of sand.

It looked like a tracery of ivory against the black surface, and the Celt called it to Frank's notice.

"Phwat do yez make av it, Misther Frank?" he asked.

"We will very soon find out!" declared the young inventor; "turn the machine in that direction!"

This was done. In a few moments the white marks were close at hand, and with a thrill of horror our adventurers recognized them.

"God help us!" exclaimed Sharpe; "they are human remains!" Half buried in the black sands there were indeed scores of human skeletons. The bones of horses were also piled up at intervals.

These bones covered a wide space, and it was evident that the company had been a large one, and that they had perished by some sudden method. What this could be was truly a puzzle.

It did not appear that a battle had been fought on the spot. It was as if the entire caravan had laid down and given themselves up to death.

Astonished at the spectacle, Frank and Daniel Sharpe gazed at the bones for some while silently.

Then Frank spoke:

"Evidently some terrible fate overtook these people all at once, Sharpe."

"I should say so."

"What could it have been?"

The distinguished traveler knit his brows and after a while replied:

"I have a theory."

"Ah, what is it?"

"There are several explanations of this catastrophe. Evidently this was an exploring party—one of many which have entered this desert never to be heard from again."

"You are right, no doubt."

"Now, encamping here for the night, a fearful simoon, such as exterminates so many caravans in the Sahara may have swept down upon them."

Frank looked incredulous.

"I can hardly believe that."

"Why?"

"The latitude is more northerly. Where would heated winds come from here, at least hot enough to stifle one?"

"You forget one fact."

"What?"

"This is a volcanic region!"

Frank gave a start.

"Yes," he admitted; "that is true."

"It would be by no means an improbable theory that some distant eruption or poisonous gases from such, had swept over the encampment at night. Or possibly they came up from the earth itself on this very spot, which has all the appearance of having once been a crater."

"You are right," agreed Frank. "In lieu of a better explanation, we may accept that, which is at least possible."

The air in the crater was extremely oppressive, and the sight of the skeletons depressed the explorers.

So it was decided not to abide there longer, but to continue the journey. The machine, therefore, left the place, and was soon pushing northward, the Kirghiz following on their horses.

Suddenly one of the horsemen, far in advance, reined up and gave a loud shout.

At the same moment everybody caught a distant silvery gleam against the black sands.

"A river!" shouted Daniel Sharpe.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE UNDERGROUND RIVER.

It was indeed a river which was revealed to the explorers' gaze. It lay like a silver ribbon across their course.

But it seemed broken in places, and did not follow a continuous line.

"What do make of it, Frank?" asked Sharpe, after they had studied it a while with their glasses.

"I am puzzled," replied the young inventor. "It looks more like a chain of very small lakes."

"There is certainly land between the different strips of water."

"Yes!"

"We shall soon find out."

The machine rolled on rapidly and soon it was seen that really a series of small strips of water extended across the desert. These did not seem to be connected in any way.

This was curious enough.

There was a possibility that they might be a series of springs or water-holes, common in deserts.

The machine drew up when quite near one of these so-called springs. Frank and Sharpe sprang down and hastened to the water's edge.

They were accorded a queer revelation.

The water was black, and seemed permeated with a sort of soot or ashes. But Sharpe gave a quick cry.

"By Jove! Put your hand in the water, Frank. What do you feel?"

The young inventor complied. The result astonished him. His fingers tingled with the experiment.

It was very hot. In fact, almost at boiling point. The whole mystery seemed explained.

What more natural in this volcanic region than to find boiling springs? But just as Frank's interest had begun to subside, Sharpe again exclaimed:

"What do you make of it?"

"A boiling spring."

"No!"

Frank was astonished.

"What?" he asked.

"It is nothing of the kind. Do you not see that there is a powerful current here?"

With this, Sharpe tossed a light piece of paper into the middle of the pool. At once it started swiftly away. A moment later it was swept under the lower bank of the pool.

"Keep watch of the next pool!" declared Sharpe. "You will see something quite wonderful."

And they did. The bit of paper suddenly shot into view in the next pool only to vanish further on. The two explorers exchanged glances.

"There is a current!" agreed Frank.

"Yes."

"What does it mean?"

"Only one thing!"

"An underground river!"

Such it was. The discovery had at once aroused great interest. Frank drew a deep breath.

"Oh, if I only had my submarine boat here now!" he said. "What a chance for exploration this would be!"

"Indeed, it would."

"Where do you think this curious river runs to?"

"Perhaps into some great underground lake. Perhaps it comes out beyond the desert many hundred miles from here. It would be hard to guess its connections."

"I believe you. I only wish we were able to explore it. But there is one thing we can do."

"What?"

"We can sound it and make a map of its visible course. Perhaps some day I may have a chance to explore it!"

"Good!" cried Sharpe, "have you a line and plummet?"

"I have the necessary apparatus and also a portable rubber boat aboard the Traveller. Barney will bring it."

Frank called to the Celt, who at once responded. In a few moments he appeared with the portable boat and the sounding line.

The Kirghiz were gathered about deeply interested in the proceedings. Frank quickly adjusted the boat. Then he stepped into it with Sharpe.

They paddled to the center of the curious river. Then Sharpe lowered the lead.

Down it quickly sank. The line paid out rapidly. Sharpe kept busily unwinding it.

At every hundred feet it was marked. One hundred feet of the line quickly slid out.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Frank, "it is deep, is it not?"

"I should say so."

"It is seldom that a river is found so deep. What, another hundred feet?"

"Yes, and still no bottom," replied Sharpe. Astonished beyond measure, the two men looked at each other.

The line itself was only about three hundred feet in length. Sharpe paid it all out, but yet no bottom was reached. There was no more line at hand.

Frank could hardly believe his senses.

"Well, I am beat," he exclaimed. "This is a region of wonders most truly. This surely is no river, but an underground lake."

"Whatever it is," said Sharpe, "I would not care to take chances in its current. After all, shall we try further to learn its depth?"

"My curiosity is satisfied," said Frank. "Let us go back to the machine."

And this they did.

The portable boat was folded and placed in the Traveller's hold. Then the explorers went aboard.

It was decided to follow the course of the strange river a reasonable distance to ascertain its outlet or delta, if it had such. But a dozen miles further on it disappeared into the desert and no further trace was to be found.

To follow it to its source was the next plan. So the machine started again to the northward.

But twenty miles above their first halting place, a great hill was discovered. It was barren and rocky with a high cliff on its southern side.

From beneath this cliff the river flowed. All other trace of its source was lost.

The Kirghiz were as deeply puzzled as our explorers. They had never heard of the existence of such a river.

So the underground river of the Desert of Death was bound to remain a total mystery. But as the travelers stood looking at the surging waters springing from beneath the cliff a startling thing happened.

The current threw forth an object which for a moment gleamed crimson and yellow in the waters. It whirled in the eddying waters and came toward the bank swiftly.

"What is that?" exclaimed Sharpe, leaning forward. Then a universal cry went up:

"A human body!"

Perfrighted, the explorers gazed upon the ghastly object. The next moment Barney sprang to the water's edge and clutched the grewsome object.

He drew it ashore, and a moment later it was stretched upon the black sands.

It was a human body.

The red and yellow tunic which it wore was unlike any ever seen by those present. Certainly, no race of people on the Steppes wore such a garment.

Moreover, in physique the unknown was totally unlike any known race. He seemed to have come from another sphere.

His body was short, extremely so, and there seemed to be but a semblance of hips or abdomen. It seemed as if the full chest occupied more than half of the usual abdominal cavity.

The neck was long and slender, and sat upon abnormally broad shoulders. The chest was thin.

The skull and features, however, were a study for a physiognomist. The brow slanted backward at an angle of forty-five degrees. The base of the skull was round and full. The eyes were set high in the brow and the nose was extremely long, and the lips were divided like those of a hare.

There was no vestige of beard, but the cranium was adorned with soft brown hair. The skin was livid.

Such was the strange nomad disclosed by the waters of the underground river. To the explorers it was an astounding revelation.

To Frank Reade, Jr. and Sharpe he bore a stronger resemblance to a Klamath Indian than anything else.

How long the body had been in the water it was impossible to guess. Whence he had come was another mystery.

The vicinity was thoroughly explored.

Every foot of the hill was examined, there being a theory that it was hollow. But this was proved to be not so.

Only one theory therefore could be advanced with any chance of acceptance.

This was that somewhere at the source of the underground river, there dwelt a race of people hitherto unknown or unheard of.

That they were aboriginal was beyond doubt. Yet, where was this unknown land from whence this strange visitor had come?

A greater mystery could not be imagined. Moreover, the clue was a baffling one. It seemed impossible to solve it.

But Frank was determined.

"I am going to clear this matter up," he declared. "I have more than curiosity to solve the mystery. I believe it is a debt we owe to the world."

"Correct!" agreed Sharpe. "Only think—that body may have been brought here from some distant, unknown Polar land. Perhaps this river flows from a region beyond the Arctic Circle."

"No, no! That is improbable!" declared Frank. "If this fellow had come from such a region he would have worn furs."

"Ah, but it is said that there are warm regions even contiguous to the Pole."

But Frank considered any such a theory as this as utterly fan-

tastic and unreasonable. However, it was likely that the source of the river was in the far north.

It did not follow, however, that the body of the strange nomad had come from such a great distance.

It was possible and even likely that somewhere again in the desert the river appeared above ground, and some such point the native had met his death by drowning.

Where his home was or his people lived was beyond conjecture. Yet it was possible that certain parts of the desert might hold an oasis or enough fertile area to support human life.

In this case it remained simply to find this spot, and it would be easy then to open communications with the unknown race of people.

This was Frank's theory, and after he had elaborated it to Sharpe, the latter was partly convinced.

"Well," he agreed, "it is not wholly impossible. Yet I cannot conceive how the Desert of Death can support human life for even a month without supplies from outside. However, wonders will never cease."

The desert cruise now had a double object.

Frank was determined, if possible, to find the supposed race of desert people to which this representative belonged. He was deeply interested in the project.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RUINED CITY.

It did not take the young inventor long to formulate his plans. One of the Kirghiz advanced a splendid idea for following the river.

He declared that by placing his ear to the black sands he could tell its underground course by the sound of the rushing waters. Frank tried the experiment.

Sure enough, a strange vibratory sound could be heard. That it was the river he felt no doubt.

This of course made progress slow. The Kirghiz would ride ahead and after locating the sounds, the Traveller would follow in that direction.

The rest of the day was passed in this manner. When night came, however, the same black expanse of sand yet extended to the horizon line.

It was unbroken by any object. A more monotonous, lonely spectacle could hardly be imagined.

Night closed down dark and dismal, for a strange sighing wind had begun to blow from the south.

This raised little whirlwinds of sand. The wind blew it in stinging clouds against the faces of the explorers.

The Kirghiz looked serious. Ali Mahmood declared that there would be a deadly simoon before morning.

They huddled about the machulus and the horses were firmly tethered. But though the wind moaned and whined across the black expanse, no storm came.

When morning broke, however, the sky was seen to be heavily overcast. The wind blew a gale and Frank decided that it would be better to wait until it had subsided before proceeding farther.

The Kirghiz were restless and uneasy. Suddenly something like a wall went up from them.

Frank and Sharpe rushed out in hot haste to see what was the matter. A strange scene was revealed.

The Kirghiz were all upon their faces in the sand.

Far out on the black expanse a strange spectacle was seen. Green hills and fertile valleys. A white city with domes and spires of silver showed plainly. All was strangely realistic.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sharpe; "that beats the Sahara, Frank!"

"Indeed it is wonderful!" agreed the young inventor.

They gazed for some while upon the mirage with deepest interest. The Kirghiz were filled with superstitious fear.

Ali Mahmood was the only self-possessed one of the party. He had traversed the Sahara and understood the spectacle.

He tried to reassure his countrymen, but it was with difficulty. The mirage remained visible for some time.

Then from a point further to the south a great black revolving cloud was seen to be coming at furious speed across the desert.

It was a funnel-shaped cloud and unlike anything our adventurers had ever seen before.

It was sweeping straight toward the mirage and seemed certain to strike into it. This increased interest in the spectacle.

Nearer the cloud drew to the mirage. Suddenly it swept into the green fields and valleys.

The change was a lightning one. Instantly all vanished like mist before the morning sun.

Only the hideous black cloud sweeping to the northward remained.

And now suddenly it swerved in its course and came straight toward the machine. A cry of alarm went up.

"We are in its course!" cried Sharpe, wildly. "We had better move, Frank!"

"Steady!" cried the young inventor; "don't be afraid! I'll fix that all right!"

With which he went forward. In a moment he was beside the forward dynamite gun.

It was but a moment's work to pull back the cylinder.

He placed a dynamite shell in the chamber and closed the breech. Then he sighted the gun.

He aimed straight for the revolving cloud; then he pressed the electric button. What followed was startling.

The cloud was easily within a mile of the Traveller.

Its great apex towered up into the zenith, shutting out the light of the sun. But the dynamite projectile changed all this.

Straight into the black cloud went the projectile. As it struck the revolving sands, the impact exploded the dynamite.

There was a fearful thunderous roar, and then lightning flashed from the cloud. Its career was terminated.

There fell with a noise, like rushing waters, that great mass of sand to the surface of the desert. Some of the dust came in a blinding cloud about the Traveller.

But the shaft of the revolving sand spout was broken, and that terminated the peril.

In a few moments the sun was once more seen straggling through the clouds above. But the mirage was no more.

The wind even seemed to die down, and a few pattering drops of rain fell. The travellers resumed their journey.

When nightfall came again, the source of the underground river was not yet in sight. Again camp was made with naught visible about them, save the same drear expanse of sand.

The next day at an early hour the journey was resumed.

This day was to develop some new and thrilling incidents. Before the party had proceeded many miles, a new and remarkable spectacle burst upon their view.

Suddenly the domes and walls of a great city of stone appeared just to the northward. Instantly the greatest excitement was created.

"Another mirage!" cried Sharpe.

But Frank, who had closely examined the distant city, said:

"Not so."

"What!" exclaimed Sharpe in amazement.

"You are wrong."

"How do you make that out? Don't be deceived, Frank. These mirages are very natural."

"I am aware of that," agreed Frank, "but yonder spectacle is not a mirage. It is a certain reality."

However, Sharpe would not believe this. Frank turned the course of the traveler toward the distant city.

The result was surprising.

Instead of receding, as would have been the case with a mirage, the distant city seemed to approach. In a very short time it was seen to be beyond doubt a certain reality.

The machine rapidly drew nearer to the ruined city.

For such it was seen to be. The great piles of stone were tumbling to decay and no living inhabitant was in sight.

Soon the Traveller slid down an incline and drew up before the battered and crumbling wall. Despite the ancient and dilapidated appearance of the place, it was easy to see that it had once been a great city.

Thousands of people had dwelt within its walls, and passed in and out its gates. Half buried now in the black sands of the desert, it was hard to tell what its former magnificence might not have been.

At some remote period a prosperous and civilized race of people had dwelt in this place.

Doubtless this was before the volcanic outburst which had made of all this area a great desert. It was hard to estimate the age of these buildings.

"Well," exclaimed Sharpe, "we still continue to find new wonders in this desert, Frank."

"You are right," agreed the young inventor.

"But one thing sticks me."

"What is it?"

"Why did these unknown people build a city in such a desolate spot as this?"

"That is only another mystery of this land of marvels."

"You are right. But I have an idea that this desert was not a desert when this city was built."

"In that premise you are undoubtedly right," agreed Frank. "A fertile and productive country may have been all about here."

"Just so! But what a sight! The population of this place were obliged to leave it no doubt hastily, to find other fields for sustenance."

"What sort of people could they have been?"

"Highly civilized I should say. If they were barbarians they had a marvelous good knowledge of architecture."

"Oh, they could not have been barbarians."

"I agree with you. But—"

"What?"

"I think we ought to take a look over the ruins. Perhaps they will explain much."

"I have no doubt of it. We will do so. Ought there not to be a gate somewhere?"

"Yonder seems to be one."

Frank started the machine along the city wall. In a few moments he had reached the gate which time had crumbled to decay.

The Traveller ran across an ancient bridge, and entered the streets of the deserted city of the desert. It was a strange experience and created novel sensations.

The machine moved along slowly between rows of high buildings, the architecture of which was nearly as good as that of ancient Rome or Athens.

The deserted city had certainly once been a mighty metropolis. But ah! what a terrible change!

It was like passing through the land of death. It was as depressing as the visiting of a tomb.

No doubt many of the old-time inhabitants had met their death

from starvation within the walls of this newly conquered place. Others had perhaps been able to reach the borders of the desert.

But who were they?

What was their story of the abandonment of their lovely city? This could not be easily learned.

Frank reckoned that not for a hundred years had anybody resided in this abandoned city. No paper records or archives could be found.

What had become of these old-time residents of the north? Were they scattered all over the world, a heterogeneous crew?

Frank and Sharpe with the Kirghiz made a close hunt for some evidence bearing upon the identity of this crew. But they could find nothing.

The disappearance of the strange people of the ruined city was very much of a mystery. From street to street the Traveller passed.

Everywhere was evidence that the devouring sands had been the cause of the city's ruin. They were piled in dunes in the squares and filled the streets in some places even to the upper windows of the dwellings.

They had sifted into every crevice and in fact permeated everywhere.

For hours the explorers wandered among the ruins of this dismantled city. But as nothing further was to be gained in this, finally Frank gave the order to return to the desert.

Daniel Sharpe took many accurate photographs of the place, and also made a map of it. These he filed away in his portfolio.

Once more the explorers emerged upon the plain and began the work of tracing the course of the underground river.

CHAPTER X.

FOLLOWING THE UNDERGROUND RIVER.

ALI MAHMOO and his Kirghiz warriors could venture no explanation as to the character of the ruined city or its long departed inhabitants.

The oldest tradition among them had no mention of anything of this sort.

So that Frank and Sharpe were left wholly in the dark. But new incidents now put the matter temporarily from their minds.

For the rest of the day they traveled on slowly, following the course of the underground river.

At night they encamped again upon the black sands.

The Kirghiz wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay down in a circle to sleep, their horses being tethered near. The search-light made a broad pathway out upon the plain.

Frank and Sharpe sat up on the forward deck until a late hour.

They were enjoying some fragrant cigars, and talking of the future. Suddenly Frank leaned forward over the rail and scrutinized the distant horizon. He remained several moments thus.

Then turning, Sharpe asked:

"What is the matter?"

Frank drew a deep breath.

"It may be an optical illusion," he said. "But look yonder where the sky meets the desert. Do you see anything?"

Sharpe complied, and his face assumed an inscrutable expression.

"It cannot be a star so low down in the sky. It must be fire."

"A distant light," said Frank, with conviction.

There it shone a small ball of fire. It seemed too low down to warrant the assumption that it was a star or any heavenly body. That it was light and probably fire on the desert there was little reason to doubt.

Astonished, the two explorers gazed at the distant light.

It would seem as if a human agency was back of it. Else what would cause such a display in that arid desert where there was nothing of a combustible sort?

Silently they watched the distant light. But as time went on and it did not waver or disappear, they began to regard it as a permanent fixture.

Frank revolved in his mind all sorts of theories.

It might be the glare of a distant eruption or some natural phenomenon as yet unexplained. He could not reconcile himself to the idea that it was the result of human agency.

The more the two explorers studied the light the more interested they became. Finally Sharpe exclaimed:

"Frank, my curiosity is powerful. I think we ought to investigate that."

"Very well," agreed the young inventor; "suppose we go forward with the machine and see what it is?"

"But the Kirghiz—"

"They will remain here all right. We can return soon."

But at this moment a dark form came over the rail. Ali Mahmoo stood before them.

He pointed to the distant light.

"What think you of that, noble effendis? Is it not the end of the desert?"

This thought had not struck Frank and Sharpe as yet. Each gave a start.

"Why, that may be true!" agreed Sharpe; "and it may be a camp, or even the lights of a town far beyond!"

But Frank doubted this.

"Let us go and investigate," he said; "will not your people wait here, Ali Mahmoo?"

The Kirghiz chief bowed low.

"We will go where you go!" he said. Then he blew a shrill whistle. In a moment every Kirghiz was upon his feet.

Preparations were quickly made for pursuing the journey. The

Traveler set out in advance at a pace which made the horses of the Kirghiz gallop hard.

The light seemed to grow plainer as they went on.

But yet it was too far away to distinguish its character, when a strange catastrophe happened.

Suddenly one of the Kirghiz, who had galloped a few hundred yards ahead of the machine, threw up his arms, and horse and rider seemed to instantly sink into the earth and disappear.

Another just behind him did the same.

The rest of the Kirghiz band pulled up and saved themselves. Sharpe, who was in the pilot house, saw the affair and shouted:

"Stop the machine, Frank, or we will be into a quicksand."

Terror was in the great traveler's tones. Frank needed no second call.

He had seen the catastrophe and was quick to act. He reversed the lever and applied the brakes. The Traveller slid a few yards through the sands and then—the worst happened.

The great machine came to a full stop, but the forward wheels went down slowly at first, but surely, until her nose was buried deep into the sands.

The rear part of the machine, however, remained above the sands and on firm ground. It was a narrow escape, for a few yards more and she would have been wholly buried in the deadly quicksand.

The terror of all on board had been great, for to take such a sudden leave of earth was by no means a pleasant thing to contemplate.

Frank and Sharpe, with Barney and Pomp, rushed to the rear part of the machine. They flung themselves over the rail, for she was expected to sink wholly into the quicksand.

But she did not.

She rested safely on the verge of the abyss. For some moments none in the party were able to recover from the shock.

The Kirghiz, white-faced and terror-struck, were grouped about, having instantly dismounted.

It was Frank who first recovered, and he went forward to the verge of the quicksand, feeling his way cautiously.

He saw at a glance that the Traveller was in a bad position.

Her forward gearing was deeply buried in the churning sands. To raise her would be no slight matter.

"Is she a loss?" asked Sharpe, with trepidation.

"I can hardly say," replied Frank. "We must try and get her out."

"How can that be done?"

Frank looked about him.

The chance was certainly not a very encouraging one. There seemed nothing near which could be used as a windlass. Trees did not grow in the desert. All was smooth sand.

The only way, of course, to extricate the machine was to pull her out by main force.

To do this, long cables, fastened to some distant object, such as a tree, seemed necessary. Frank intimated this to Sharpe.

The distinguished traveler's face lit up, and he exclaimed:

"We can fix that all right."

"How?"

"Bring out the cables, and with the aid of the Kirghiz and their horses, we can drag the vehicle out. There will be a tremendous force to depend upon."

"You are right," agreed the young inventor, with alacrity; "it will be a powerful force—certainly as strong as the electric engines."

No time was lost.

Barney and Pomp sped after the cable. This was taken from the hold of the machine. It was a powerful one.

Frank fastened it to the rear of the machine. Then it was extended fifty yards out upon the plain.

A whistle-tree with wide evening was made from some pieces of the Traveller's rail, and strong traces and collars were improvised from pieces of the cable and the saddle girths.

The horses of the Kirghiz were thus harnessed, and then the men also laid hold of the rope.

At the first word horses and men all bent to the task. The Traveller heaved and swayed, but seemed yet to hold fast.

"Once more," shouted Sharpe. "We moved her and she will come."

Again they bent to the straining, but just as the machine seemed about to yield, there was a loosening of the cable, and horses and men went down in a heap.

The knot had slipped, and it became necessary to replace it. This time it was made stronger.

Then once more the tug was made. This time the pull was steady and even.

Slowly and steadily the machine began to come out of the sands. On and on they pulled. A moment more and the great feat was done.

The Traveller was pulled back to a point of safety upon the plain. A great cheer went up.

The cable was loosened and the horses were again saddled. But all this had required hours of hard work, and daylight was at hand.

The distant mysterious light had paled, but Frank marked the spot on the horizon. It took some time to get things to rights again.

The running gear of the Traveller was badly clogged with the clinging sands. It was necessary to clear this. And by the time it was done the sun was up.

It was easy now to mark the quicksand. It was a huge liquid area of sand, covering a full acre. The two luckless Kirghiz would never be heard from again.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank, when all was at rights again; "the

perils of this region are not to be lightly enumerated. I wonder what will come next!"

"The underground river and the quicksand are literal death traps," averred Sharpe.

All agreed to this.

"Bejabs!" cried Barney; "I'll keep an eye out for the likes of them things, yez can bet."

"Golly! I never was so skeered in all mah life," averred Pomp.

"On to the end of this strange region," cried Frank, as he clambered aboard the machine.

"What is the move?" asked Sharpe; "shall we return and keep to the course of the underground river?"

"Not yet," replied Frank. "My first desire is to ascertain the source of that light which we saw."

"All right!"

The quicksand was cautiously skirted, and then the party once more pressed forward. Hours passed.

It seemed as if they must surely have proceeded far enough to see the location of the mysterious light. Frank began to fear that his bearings were wrong.

But all at once a new scene began to rise on the horizon. A low, dark line was first seen. The hills began to show.

These were covered with green, and fields and forests were identified. But in the foreground the white walls and domes of a city were seen.

Astonished, the explorers gazed upon the wonderful scene which contrasted so strongly with the desert. Then Sharpe cried:

"Alas! it is only another mirage!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLATHEADS.

For a moment the rest of the party were inclined to share Sharpe's conviction. But Frank Reade, Jr., finally exclaimed:

"That is not so. I tell you, friends, it is not a mirage, but a real city!"

"Begorra, that's right," cried Barney, "as ivery wan kin see!"

Sharpe peered through his glass for awhile at the distant vision. Then he, too, exclaimed:

"Yes, that is right; it is a reality!"

With this announcement much excitement was created.

Was it another ruined and deserted city, or was it inhabited? They were not as yet near enough to tell.

But the machine was rapidly drawing nearer. Soon the gates of the city, shining in the sunlight, were easily seen.

Then human figures were seen moving about. All doubt was dispelled.

Without any fear of the unknown people, Frank pressed forward. Soon they were out of the desert and traversing the green slopes to the city gates.

And as they went on great flocks of sheep, tended by shepherds, were seen on the hillsides. These shepherds were like the unknown nomads found in the river, both in feature and in dress.

At last the great mystery was solved. A new race and an unknown nation had been discovered.

The delight of the adventurers was unbounded. Sharpe could not restrain his eagerness.

The machine could not travel fast enough for him. As they now drew nearer to the city, it could be seen that their appearance had created a commotion.

The gates were closed down, the loungers outside scattered, and armed men appeared on the walls. It was a strange spectacle.

The shepherds on the hillsides had fled at sight of the Kirghiz and the Traveller. There was all evidence that the unknown people recognized the party only as foes and invaders.

That they would defend themselves was apparent. Armed with long spears and bows and arrows, they wore a formidable set of barbarians.

Frank knew of course that his electric guns offset all these weapons, and that he could have easily reduced the city. But he had no desire to assume the role of conqueror.

So he adopted at once pacific measures.

Seen from the Traveller's deck the city was a large one.

It covered several square miles and ought to hold a population of fully eight or ten thousand souls. It was protected by high walls.

It was a singular fact that there were few abodes outside these walls. All the country about was under process of cultivation, but the farmers evidently returned to their abodes within the city walls.

It was plain to see that the city was really a place of refuge, a citadel, and this would seem to indicate that the strange people had foes and thus guarded against attack.

It was not strange to Frank then that they presented an aggressive front. He at once adopted a conciliatory attitude.

To pacify them he realized would be no easy matter. But he was resolved to try it.

The Kirghiz, true to their instincts, were for conquest. But Frank would not hear to this.

He caused the Traveller to draw slowly nearer the walled city.

Then he displayed a white flag. The only answer was a shower of arrows.

"They evidently do not recognize the white flag as a sign of truce," declared Sharpe; "they are not conversant with the laws of nations."

"It would seem so!" agreed Frank; "but I know not what else to try!"

"It would not be safe for one to show himself!"

This was true.

The clouds of arrows fired from the city walls would mean certain death. Such an exposure would be suicidal.

For some while the travelers remained before the gate, valiantly trying to adopt some method for securing a parley.

Frank kept hoping all the while that they would note the pacific attitude of the new-comers and send out an envoy. But this was not done.

The flat-headed people, or "Flatheads," as Sharpe called them, were fiercely aggressive and seemed not in the least disposed to make friends. Frank was put to his wit's end.

The Kirghiz had been obliged to retire some distance from the machine to avoid the arrows.

They retired to a hillside about half a mile away, and now a new complication arose.

From the forests on the hillside bands of shepherds began to attack the Kirghiz. Several were shot from their saddles. Of course it was in the nature of the Tartars to retaliate.

Frank could not deny them this, so the shepherds were assailed in turn. The result was that a lively battle was soon in progress.

"By Jove!" cried Sharpe, "we have struck a hornet's nest. Frank, we can never make friends with these people. They act like mad fools!"

"That is true," agreed Frank, with surprise and dismay. "What on earth can we do?"

"Give it up."

"What?"

"Get out of here at once. After all, we shall not gain so very much by establishing intercourse with them. It is enough to know that we have located them. Let somebody else do the rest. We should go on and explore the rest of the desert."

Frank could not help but admit the logic of this.

Indeed, it began to look as if he would be compelled to, in any event, accept Sharpe's plan.

For suddenly the gate of the city flew open. An immense number of the Flatheads poured out.

They were going to the relief of their compatriots, the shepherds. They meant warfare for a certainty.

Frank now yielded.

He saw that it was of no use to try and make friends with these wretches. To be sure he might have met them in a terrific fashion, and brought them to terms with the electric guns.

But this would call for terrific slaughter, and he would not think of it. So he said to Barney:

"Turn the Traveller about and let us get out of here. Give those chaps on the hill a taste of a dynamite shell, and that will help Ali Mahmoos and his men to get away. We will go back to the desert."

Barney obeyed orders.

The dynamite shell, exploding in the midst of the crew on the hillside, scattered them like chaff.

It gave Ali Mahmoos and his men a chance to withdraw, and they preceded the Traveller out onto the desert.

This angered Frank and he said:

"On my word, I can restrain myself no longer. I'll give those chaps a bit of a lesson!"

He went to the after gun and trained it on the barbarians. Then he pressed the electric button.

Frank aimed the gun so that it would throw the bomb a little short of the mark. It was not his purpose to annihilate the barbarians, but simply to terrorize them.

The bomb struck a few feet in advance of the oncoming host. It exploded with a terrible roar.

The sand rose in a column full fifty feet into the air. An immense hole was blown into the ground which would bury half a hundred men and horses.

The Flatheads were thrown into great confusion by this. They broke and fled in various directions.

Frank sent bomb after bomb after them, and the result was that the terrified natives retreated to the security of their city walls.

It might have been possible now to have returned and made friends with them, but Frank did not do so.

He allowed the Traveller to skirt the fertile region, which he now suspected to be not the upper verge of the desert, but only an oasis in its midst.

For many miles the machine ran along the dividing line between the desert and the oasis.

On one side were the black sands, and upon the other the green slopes and forest, so well watered by the elements in the midst of that desolate region.

Suddenly Barney called Frank's attention to a distant glimmer of silver, which seemed to extend across their path. As the young inventor gazed upon it, he suddenly cried:

"It is water!"

At once the deepest interest was aroused. Sharpe, who stood near by, ventured an opinion.

"On my word," he said, "what if it should be a part of the underground river?"

"It very likely is," agreed Frank.

There was a very good reason for this inference. The river flowed down across the desert as far as the eye could reach. It emerged from the oasis.

In a short while the Traveller was close to the river bank. At this juncture the stream was wide.

It emerged from a cleft in the hills, and its banks were high and green clad. Frank decided to follow it up to learn if possible if the oasis was its source.

So he turned the course of the machine into the narrow pass, or canyon, more properly speaking. But the next moment a wonderful sight burst upon the view of all.

They saw a great chain of hills beyond, and between them, occupying a huge basin, was a mighty lake.

All could be seen at a glance. The desert river was the outlet of this lake, and its true source.

The scene was a rarely beautiful one to the voyagers, coming from the desert as they did. They gazed upon it for some while with interest.

There was no sign of human habitation in the vicinity, which was evidence that the Flatheads occupied only the southern part of the oasis.

Explorations here could be conducted with perfect safety. But Frank decided to keep on the journey.

So the party returned to the desert.

Once more the Traveller was called upon to ford a river. The Kirghiz swam their horses across all safely.

In due course the opposite bank was reached. Until nightfall the party progressed to the northward.

Then the oasis began to dwindle; the desert crept in and gradually vegetation ceased.

Soon it was left behind, and once more the travelers were in a region of desolation and solitude.

For three days they traveled ever to the north. Then they came at last to the verge of the desert.

Once more they came upon the Steppes of Siberia, and the Kirghiz were so delighted that they could hardly contain themselves. It was like emerging from the shadow of a tomb.

Frank had but one more desire now, and this was to return to Stepnakh by means of the eastern border of the desert. It would mean a wide detour and a complete circuit, but it would avoid the dangers of another trip across the black expanse.

The Kirghiz readily agreed to this plan, for none of them had a wish to again venture into the desert.

But there were other perils to be encountered fully as great as those of the desert. One of these was near at hand.

The northern occupants or dwellers of the Steppes are Cossacks, a fierce and lawless tribe of nomads. Now there was ever a deadly feud between the Kirghiz and the Cossacks.

None knew this better than Ali Mahmoos, and also the danger of encountering their traditional enemies so far from home.

CHAPTER XII.

THE END.

BUT Ali Mahmoos knew that they were under the protection of the Traveller and its electric guns.

Hence he felt comparatively safe, though his comrades were a bit uneasy. However, there was no faltering.

So, after a day's rest, the start homeward was begun.

The machine as usual went ahead, the Kirghiz riding behind. As the floor of the desert made a smoother surface to travel over, the party adhered to it.

For a long while they journeyed on thus. The day was waning, when suddenly Ali Mahmoos pulled up his horse with a warning cry.

From a hollow of the Steppes there had suddenly appeared a cavalcade of the wildest description—men perched in high saddles upon the backs of wiry little horses.

They were dressed in the skins of wild beasts and carried long lances. They were Cossacks, pure and simple.

They sat upon their horses full a hundred of them, and gazed with amazement at the Traveller and at the Kirghiz. They made a forbidding spectacle.

Then as they recognized the Kirghiz, a strange, wolf-like cry rose upon the air.

"Ye gods!" ejaculated Sharpe; "they are Cossacks, Frank."

"So I perceive," replied the young inventor. "Wild looking chaps."

And as the travelers looked at the nomads of the Steppes, they did not wonder at the terror of Napoleon's Moscow legions when overtaken in the snow by these merciless wretches.

Their very appearance was terrifying in the extreme.

But they did not remain long inactive. They had recognized in the party only a band of invading Kirghiz with some sort of a curious "drosky," or vehicle.

To them the party were legitimate prey, and at once they decided to pounce upon them.

It looked like an easy matter to overwhelm so small a number. They did not count upon the Traveller.

"They are going to attack us!" cried Sharpe.

"It looks like it," said Frank, coolly.

"They are darned devils!"

"We will tame them!"

Frank had turned the machine head on to the foe. He stood by the electric gun.

Barney and Pomp were at the netting with their repeaters. The Kirghiz hovered behind the vehicle.

With fierce yells the Cossacks dashed down the slope.

Frank at once discharged the gun. The bomb exploded in the midst of the savage crew with awful effect.

Horses tumbled in a heap, men went down, and great heaps of debris rose in the air. The entire cavalcade was split in two.

The other horses of the survivors dashed in mind-fright back up the slope. A bandful of the Cossacks got by the machine.

They were instantly attacked by the Kirghiz, who drove them back with great slaughter. It was an instantaneous and decisive victory for the travelers.

The Kirghiz yelled themselves hoarse, and wanted to pursue the survivors of the band. But Ali Mahmoo held them in check, for he knew the wisdom of such a move. There was no telling how large a force might be held in reserve.

But the surviving Cossacks disappeared beyond the rise of land, and did not return to the attack. The battle was over for the present.

But none in the party for an instant allowed himself to be deceived by this.

The Cossacks never abandoned an attack upon a foe. Like the North American Indian, they would follow shadow-like, waiting for a weak moment to strike a decisive blow.

All knew that they had by no means seen the last of the Cossacks.

But no time was lost in useless pursuit. By Frank's orders the journey was at once resumed.

"If they attack us again," he said, "we must meet them in the same way."

The rest of the day the party pushed on rapidly. When nightfall came they camped well on in the desert.

The reason for this was to baffle a direct advance by the Cossacks. An attack on open ground would be disastrous for them in the extreme.

Two watched that night, besides the Kirghiz sentries. Just after midnight Barney spied dark forms moving just beyond the limit of light made by the search-light.

That they were Cossacks there was no doubt.

Rifle bullets began to ring across the intervening desert. This delighted the Celt, who at once aroused Pomp, as Sharpe was already with him.

Then with the Kirghiz fire was returned. The Cossacks did not venture an open attack.

But this desultory fire was kept up all night. When morning came, however, not a Cossack was seen.

"Bejabbers, I reckon they've had enough," said Barney.

But Sharpe shook his head.

"Not much!" he declared. "We shall not get rid of them for some while yet."

"That is right," agreed Frank.

"They will hang to us hoping to get us away from the open space of the desert where they can make a closer attack. Be sure they will be on hand again to-night."

"I have an idea," said Frank.

"What is it?"

"We can cut out into the desert and shake them in that way."

"Ah, don't you believe it. When you return you will find them awaiting you."

All laughed at this.

"No wonder that Russia feels safe with hordes of such soldiers at her command," said Frank. "Well, I am going to try the experiment anyway."

So the machine was headed far out into the desert. Soon naught but the unbroken expanse of sand was all about.

Then the southerly course was taken. Until noon nightfall it was held. Then the course was changed eastward again.

By dark the border of the desert was again reached. Camp was made and not a Cossack was seen.

But a little after midnight, Pomp, who was on guard, saw hovering forms just as Barney had.

The same experience of the night before was enacted.

When daybreak came not a Cossack was to be seen. Frank at once put on his thinking cap. At length he asked Sharpe:

"Do you think they will keep this thing up every night?"

"Certainly!"

"Humph!"

"They will not desist until they get us in a weak place, or we have penetrated too far south for them to go with safety. I know these chaps well!"

"Very well," said Frank. "I think I know of a way to give them a smart lesson!"

"Oh, what is it?"

"Wait until to-night and you shall see," replied Frank.

All that day they kept at the same southerly course. They were now getting well down toward the end of the desert.

The Kirghiz were wildly imploring the chance to attack the Cossacks. Even Ali Mahmoo was eager.

So Frank said:

"You shall have the chance to-night, but you must follow my directions."

At once all was eagerness and excitement. Frank's plans were quickly made.

The night was as dark as Erebus. This was favorable, and Frank felt confident of success.

As soon as utter gloom had settled down he directed movements. First one of the incandescent lights of the cabin was taken down and placed outside upon the sands.

An immense reflector was placed back of it, so that it looked much like the search-light when half burning.

Then Frank improvised a gun carriage, and the after gun of the machine was taken out and mounted upon it. Being but a light cylinder this was easy.

Bombs were placed beside it, and Frank said:

"Barney, I want you and Mr. Sharpe to defend this spot. When the Cossacks come to the attack give them fits. You are safe, for you can hold an army at bay with this gun."

Then Frank explained his plan.

When the Cossacks should show themselves after midnight, shots were to be exchanged. Then every light aboard the Traveller would be extinguished.

Then the machine would be sent silently in the darkness around to the rear of the Cossacks. Retreat thus cut off, and having them between two fires, they could be thoroughly whipped. The Kirghiz were at liberty to chase those who escaped.

The plan met with the delighted approval of all.

With intense eagerness the midnight hour was awaited.

And promptly at the usual time the Cossacks appeared. Again their shadowy forms were seen hovering in the distance.

Again the interchange of rifle shots began. This time the nomads seemed bolder, and came nearer.

This was just what Frank wanted. Suddenly the Traveller's lights went out.

Frank had only Pomp with him aboard the machine. Barney and Sharpe remained by the decoy light.

Of course, seeing the fainter light, the Cossacks ventured nearer. Frank sent the machine out into the desert on a long detour.

The rubber tired wheels ran almost noiselessly over the sands. A long half circle was made.

The Kirghiz were flat upon their faces in the sand back of Barney and Sharpe, answering the fire of the foe, who were now at short range. Barney and the great traveler were obliged to lie low to escape the flying bullets.

Nearer crept the audacious Cossacks. Suddenly a great light burst upon them from the rear. The whole gang were revealed as plain as day.

Astounded, they wheeled their horses, but at that moment a bomb burst in their midst. Many a Cossack and horse were blown to fragments.

They charged then direct for the decoy light. But a shot from that direction also met them.

Back they surged, only to meet another bomb. The plain was strewn with bodies. The slaughter was fearful.

Then up sprang the Kirghiz with their battle cry. The mad pursuit began.

It was long after daybreak before the last Kirghiz returned. Once more the explorers turned their faces southward.

The next night not a Cossack disturbed the encampment. They were seen no more on the trip.

They were now near the lower verge of the desert. Soon the Kirghiz encampment came into view. The meeting between the retreating warriors and their wives was an affectionate one. The great exploration of the Desert of Death had been accomplished successfully. There was nothing more to be desired.

Frank Reade, Jr., proposed that they proceed directly to St. Petersburg now, and ship for home from there. On their homeward way surely the Russian authorities would not molest them.

So leave was taken of Ali Mahmoo and his people. The journey was begun.

It was an interesting trip, and marked by many incidents for which we have no space here. In due time St. Petersburg was reached and the Traveller shipped home.

The travelers went to London and returned by another steamer. They arrived in New York, only to learn that the Russian vessel with the Traveller aboard had gone down in a storm.

Frank naturally felt bad over the loss of his invention, but only said:

"Never mind; I have another in view which will eclipse that!"

In the near future we shall hope to describe the new invention.



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